

# JOBLESS, HOMELESS, AND IGNORED

## A Perspective on Family Homelessness in New York City



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AN OPINION BRIEF FROM THE INSTITUTE FOR CHILDREN AND POVERTY

New York City's November unemployment figure—remaining high at 10%—released today is not much of a surprise to anyone. The growing number of vacant storefronts, budget-conscious consumers, strained businesses, and nervous employees serve as constant reminders that the lacerations of the economic crisis have not yet healed. Fatigued and dismayed, most do not seem to be holding their breath for a miracle.

Not to say that a miracle would not be welcomed, particularly amongst those least prepared to maneuver the uncharted waters of the uncertain labor market. Unemployment stands at almost 27% for 16 to 19 year olds, at 16% for 20 to 24 year olds, and at 15% for high school dropouts. Lost in this sea of percentages are a group of individuals that are regrettably absent from most, if not all, policy discussions concerning the city's economy: homeless parents. They are amongst the youngest and poorest New Yorkers without a high school education and they, along with their children, are suffering.

Tonight, over 10,000 families with more than 16,200 children will sleep in the city's family shelters. And they keep coming. On a typical day no fewer than 150 new families attempt to qualify for city-funded shelter services. Many more parents sleep two and three children on the couches and floors of friends and family, unable or unwilling to subject them to the city's arduous shelter eligibility process. Stories of families sleeping in cars, tents, and in substandard housing are no longer rare across America.

Why do families become homeless? The recent U.S. Conference of Mayors' *Hunger and Homelessness Survey* cites a lack of affordable housing, poverty, unemployment, low-paying jobs, and domestic violence as the top reasons nationwide. In New York, not much has changed from the 2005 Vera Institute of Justice report, *Understanding Family Homelessness in New York City*, citing job loss, eviction, loss of public benefits, and health problems as the main reasons. Economic self-sufficiency is at the root of many of these issues, and they do not disappear once a family acquires permanent housing. In fact, the number of families returning within months or a few short years is growing: four out of every 10 families entering a New York City shelter during the past year have been through the system at some time in the past.

The plain truth is that only a small number of homeless parents have the education and job skills to remain permanently employed and generate steady incomes. In New York City, homeless parents are predominantly female, young, and ill-prepared for

work. While they range in age from 18 to over 50, over 40% are less than 24 years old. Roughly two out of every three are currently unemployed, and over 10% have never worked. Among those without a high school education, about 20% have never worked. Even among those who are working, more than 40% are working only part-time mostly in low-skill, low-wage jobs.

Why should we care? According to a recent Community Service Society report, each New Yorker without a high school diploma on average represents a cost to the public coffers for cash and in-kind benefits, as well as institutional costs such as shelter stay, totaling about \$134,000 over their lifetime. Putting aside the human cost, the negative budgetary impact of a young, ill-prepared, and growing homeless family population is frighteningly calculable. As such, we can no longer afford to ignore their education and employment needs.

Unfortunately, the debate about how to end family homelessness is caught in a current dominated by housing "solutions". Obviously, families require housing to end their homelessness. But they require much more. Only education and employment can provide the tools to address economic factors that have rendered so many families homeless. Just ask any homeless mother what her dream job is and her response will be concrete and sensible: home health attendant, secretary, certified nurse assistant, child-care worker. Respectable jobs that are vital to our city's economic and social landscape. Yet these are jobs that will be difficult to obtain without services, first to get the necessary high school degree or GED, second to obtain the skills necessary on the job, and finally to acquire the tools to avoid typical stumbling blocks to stable employment such as child care and transportation.

Many shelters encourage voluntary compliance with education and employment "requirements" as a condition of their stay. But we cannot expect miracles if we do not invest in people. Expectations must be coupled with supports in the form of on-site job readiness, training, placement, and retention services, as well as GED preparation and literacy programs. Shelters should be seen as a resource to help families address their challenges, create opportunities, and assist them in taking a first and lasting step toward labor market participation. In the end, is there any other way for a homeless parent to emerge from the invisibility of grim unemployment statistics than with a diploma and a job?

**We invite you to share your thoughts on family homelessness and unemployment. Please email your comments to [llwallace@icpn.org](mailto:llwallace@icpn.org)**

## References

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The Institute for Children and Poverty (ICP) is an independent non-profit research organization based in New York City. ICP studies the impact of poverty on family and child well-being and generates research that will enhance public policies and programs affecting poor or homeless children and their families. Specifically, ICP examines the condition of extreme poverty in the United States and its effect on educational attainment, housing, employment, child welfare, domestic violence, and family wellness. Please visit our Web site for more information: [www.icpny.org](http://www.icpny.org)

